

Military Records Destroyed in Blaze At St. Louis Center

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(AP)—Firefighters battled acrid smoke and withering heat today in an attempt to salvage tons of service files from a fire on the sixth floor of the huge Military Personnel Record Center here.

The General Services Administration in Washington said documents stored on the sixth floor included millions of military records essential to applications for retirement and disability benefits.

The Army record included about five million from the World War I era, about nine million from World War II and about six million post-World War II documents for soldiers who served until the late 1950s, the GSA said.

Army officials in Washington said many of the records were not duplicated anywhere.

Nine St. Louis County fire departments fought the blaze this afternoon. Firemen trying to climb to the burning top level were repelled by the intense heat.

The roof of the two-block-long, concrete and steel structure began to buckle from the fiery ruins of equipment and records below, and fire officials feared it would collapse.

"Once it collapses we'll have a hell of a time putting the fire out," one said.

Three firefighters were taken from the scene and treated at a hospital for smoke inhalation. A fourth was treated for a punctured knee.

A spokesman for the GSA, which operates the million-square-foot structure, said the Federal Bureau of Investigation was probing the possibility that arson was the cause of the fire.

"Over the past 24 months there have been about a dozen fires that appear to have been of incendiary origin in the building," said F. Howard Whiteley, a GSA official in Kansas City.

"I haven't received any concrete information as to its applicability here, but it certainly isn't being ruled out," he said.

Whiteley said about 50 persons were in the building when the fire was spotted by a maintenance employee about midnight Wednesday. All escaped without apparent injury.

"Whatever isn't burned out is as wet as can be," Army Col. Wesley C. Scarborough said of the damage.

Heat and water damage resulted on the fifth floor, where the Navy said about 20 million personnel and medical records dating from 1885 to the present were stored. The records do not include those of officers and enlisted men now on active duty.

Records on the sixth floor also included about 30,000 files for Army Air Corps soldiers during World War II.

The GSA said it hoped to salvage from the sixth floor a tape and disc record retriever system which would aid in duplicating any lost records.

In Washington, the benefits office of the Veterans Administration said it would be unable to answer inquiries concerning destroyed records at its field offices until damage to the building was assessed.

Problems could arise when persons file for disability benefits and medical records are necessary to establish the service connection, a spokesman said. Most World War I and World War II veterans who would file such claims have already done so, he said.